

German president silent on the Holocaust at WWII memorial

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On December 7, 1970, German Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees before the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto, in penance for the extermination of the Jews by the German Nazi regime. Although this “Warsaw genuflection” was not without self-interest—Brandt’s so-called “Ostpolitik” secured German big business access to the markets and raw materials of Eastern Europe—it signified a political turning point. After years in which the German state had systematically covered up and trivialized its historic crimes, Germany was finally confronting its responsibility.

Almost fifty years later, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (like Brandt, a Social Democrat) spoke in Warsaw at a ceremony to mark the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. He failed to utter a single word about the Jews or the Holocaust. This silence is no less symbolic than Brandt’s genuflection. It is an unmistakable signal that the Nazis’ crimes are being downplayed for very definite political purposes.

First, Steinmeier’s silence on the Holocaust was a concession to the ultra-nationalist Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) government and party leader Jaroslav Kaczynski, who are deeply rooted in the anti-Semitic traditions of the Catholic church and glorify Polish dictator Josef Pilsudski. The PiS has systematically sought to rewrite history over recent years and passed laws which threaten to criminalize any scholar or publicist who researches or writes on anti-Semitism in Poland.

But above all, Steinmeier’s silence about the Holocaust was a concession to the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in his own country. Within the framework of Germany’s return to an aggressive imperialist foreign policy, the ruling class is

systematically building up and promoting this fascistic party. On the same day Steinmeier delivered his speech in Warsaw, the AfD emerged from two state elections—in Saxony and Brandenburg—as the second-largest party. Steinmeier’s address was not a mistake. He is an experienced politician who knows what he is doing. The Federal Presidential Office has a staff of some 180 people, who carefully prepare every one of his speeches and discuss them within the government apparatus.

On the morning of September 1, Steinmeier visited the small town of Vielun with Polish President Andrzej Duda. The residents of this town were the first to be bombarded from the air when Germany invaded Poland eighty years ago. Here, too, he merely mentioned the Jews and the Holocaust in passing, in a single clause, and he only explicitly apologized “to the Polish victims of the German reign of terror.” And this despite the fact that around a third of Vielun’s population of 16,000 was Jewish, and that tens of thousands of Jews would later be deported from the city’s ghetto to the Kulmhof concentration camp.

Then, when Steinmeier spoke to over 250 state guests from 40 countries in the afternoon, he failed to mention the Holocaust at all. Yet the Nazis murdered some 1.6 million ethnic Poles and around 3 million Jews, which equated to 90 percent of Poland’s Jewish population. The only victims of German war crimes mentioned by Steinmeier were “Polish men and women,” as well as “Poland, its culture, its cities and its people.”

Monika Krawczyk, the head of the League of the Jewish Community in Poland, was outraged, saying, “How could he not bring himself to utter the word Jew? What was stopping him from talking about the Holocaust and the Jewish resistance? A professional, who ought to know the history of the occupation of

Poland, only apologizes to one victim and forgets the others. I'm speechless."

The *Tageszeitung*, which was the only German newspaper to report on Steinmeier's silence, expressed disbelief. The paper described it as "totally incomprehensible" as to why he had not asked the Polish Jews for forgiveness.

In reality, it is not incomprehensible. With his Warsaw speech, Steinmeier was demonstrating to the AfD that he is in fundamental agreement with it when its leaders describe the Holocaust as "bird poop" and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin as a "monument of shame." While he never tires of hypocritically expressing his horror over the Nazis, Steinmeier's silence on the Holocaust, and his attempt to curry favor with the far-right PiS, shows where he really stands politically.

The rise of the far right is an international phenomenon. These forces are needed by the ruling elite, under conditions of mounting great-power conflict and social tensions, to strengthen the apparatus of state repression, press ahead with militarist policies and suppress all forms of social opposition.

Steinmeier has played a leading role in the promotion of the extreme right in Germany. As head of the Chancellor's Office under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), Steinmeier was responsible for the German intelligence agencies for seven years, which systematically built up and covered for right-wing extremist networks.

As Foreign Minister, Steinmeier supported the 2014 fascist-led coup in Ukraine, collaborating in the process with right-wing extremist forces, such as the Svoboda Party of Oleh Tyahnybok, with whom he personally met. During the same year, he appealed at the Munich Security Conference for Germany to rearm as a military power. Germany is "too big just to comment on world politics from the sidelines," he stated.

Following the 2017 federal election, Steinmeier played a key role in the SPD's decision to continue the grand coalition government. This made the AfD the official opposition party in parliament. In November 2017, he even invited AfD leaders Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel to a personal consultation in Bellevue Castle, the President's official residence.

Steinmeier's speech in Poland fits perfectly into this political tradition. While shedding crocodile tears over

Germany's crimes in World War II, he called for German hegemony in Europe and a major program of military rearmament. "I'm well aware that my country has a special responsibility for this Europe," he said. "The fact that Germany, despite its history, was allowed to grow to new strength in Europe means that we Germans must do more for Europe. We must contribute more to European security."

Poland is strategically important for Berlin, both economically and militarily. With annual total trade of €120 billion (2018), Poland has surpassed Britain as Germany's sixth-largest trading partner. And it is an important region for massing troops and a military ally against Russia.

While US Vice President Mike Pence, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky took part in the ceremony, the Polish government made a point of not inviting Russian President Vladimir Putin. And this in spite of the fact that the Soviet Union bore the brunt of the war against Nazi Germany.

Steinmeier also shamefully falsified this history in the interests of building an alliance with Polish nationalists. He only indirectly referred to the Red Army and denied its decisive role in the victory over the Nazis. "On this anniversary, all of us look gratefully to the United States," he said to flatter US Vice President Mike Pence, who was representing Trump. "The strength of its armies, combined with its western and eastern allies, defeated National Socialism."

Steinmeier's speech in Warsaw underscores that the SPD and all the other established parties agree with the fascistic AfD on all essential questions. Only an independent movement of the international working class, uniting the struggle against militarism, the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus and social inequality, with the fight against their source, the capitalist profit system, can confront the danger posed by the far right.



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